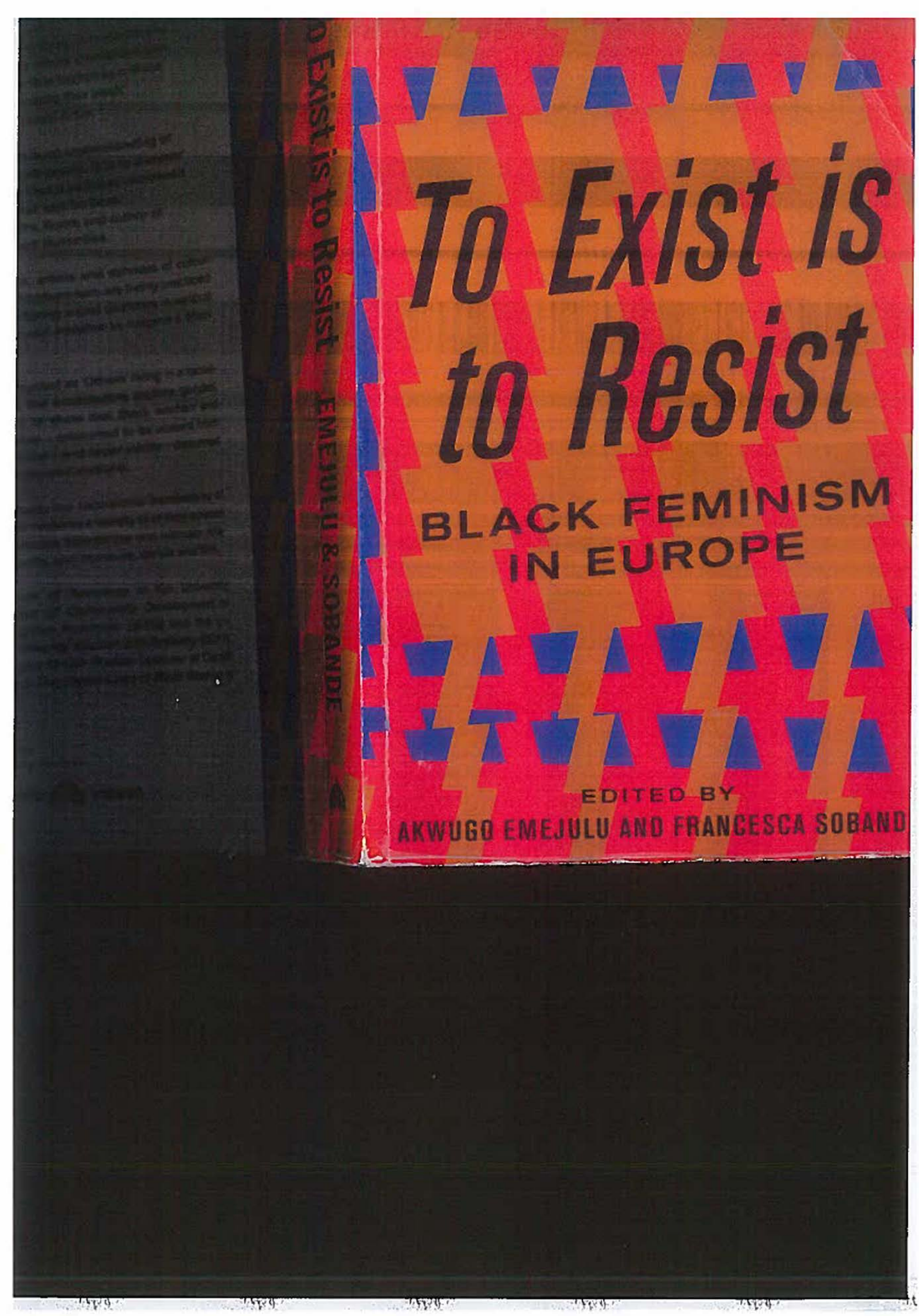
To Exist is to Resist
BLACK FEMINISM IN EUROPE
EDITED BY
AKWUGO EMEJULU AND FRANCESCA SOBAND
To Exist is to Resist EMEJULU & SOBANDE

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16. Collins, 'Black feminist epistemology: p. 268.
17. 'Sheneneh' Is an African-American pop cultural figure of a loud-spoken and stereotypical Black woman from the series *Martin* from 1992.
18. Isted$_{ga}$de is a street name, and the historical home of Copenhagen's red light· district. An Increasing number of Black women, mostly from West Africa and without documents, do sex work in the area.
19. Hedwig Lee and Margaret Takako Hicken, 2016. 'Death *by* a thousand cuts: The health Implications of Black respectability politics'. S011/s 18(2-4); 421-45.
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21. Marianne Gullestad, 2006. *Plausible Prtjudice, Everyday Experiences anil Social Images ofNation, Culture and Race.* Unlversiletsforl$_{ag}$et, Oslo.
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24. Said in English with an American accent, despite the rest of the conversadoa being In Danish.
25. See Tate, 'Racial affective economies'.
26. Glenn, 'Stepping in and stepping out'.
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18

Africanist Sista-hood in Britain: Creating Our Own Pathways

Chijioke Obasi

Attempts have been made to provide an analytical fr$_{am}$ework for Black women that centraHses our experiences and perspectives both as individuals and collectives. Much of this work has focused on Black feminism emanating from America, but this does not provide adequate reflection on the specific situation in BrltaJn. Developments in Black British feminism have gone some *way* to address this,[1] however, it is the British context that brings with it issues of contestation around who is considered Black that are also translated into this discourse. Difficulties around the use of existing feminist fr$_{am}$eworks with their roots embedded in racism and the marginalJsatlon ofBlack women has caused many to declare their difficulty with the theory and more resolutely the terminology of feminism. Womanism has provided a useful alternative but in Britain has had much less appeal or recognition.

The chapter seeks to build on existing works in Black womanhood and to contribute to emancipatory frameworks that foreground the cognitive authority of subjugated knowers.[2] *A* theoretical framework termed i\frkanist Sista-hood in Britain' is offered as a Black female-centred framework for analysls.[3] Within it Is recognition of the importance and rvalue of collectivity, connectivity, commonaUty and difference amongst Black women, where Uved experience and self-deflnltlon arc held in high .n-sard.

Given the position put forward *by* Hudson-Weems in her discussion of.ffilack feminism that 'for many in the academy who reject it and who ff beyond by creating alternative paradigms, they experience blatant unsuccessful attempts to silence them via ostracism and exclusion from die academic circle of either publication ... and/or dlalogue:[4] it could lie concluded that any attempt *to* truly move outside of a feminist frame Will be met with contempt and result in a fruitless endeavour. However,

for those of us Black women who participate in the courageous act of rejecting Black feminism,' we owe it to ourselves to at least try!

FRAMING AFRICANIST SISTA-HOOD IN BRITAIN

Guest et al.[6] discuss the work ofBruce Lee in developing his own fighting style due to his dissatisfaction with existing styles. The end product is not a new fighting style but a synthesis of the most useful techniques from numerous existing ones. In reflecting on this fighting style Lee describes it as something that ls fluid and flexible, inviting practitioners to take from it what they choose rather than trying to follow a prescribed process. In Africanlst Sista-hood in Britain a similar fluidity is built In, a fluidity that allows for incorporation of the work of our Sistes without being constrained by the frames of feminism.

The framework evolved as part of a PhD study[7] by a Black woman with Black women at the centre of the research. It looked at perspectives'of. equality and diversity from women working in a range of public sector organisations mainly in the north of England. The centrality of Bl:ack womanhood did not, however, negate the Inclusion 'of others, as the research also Included culturally Deafwomen in the workplace. Althougli the majority of the participants were Black (hearing) women (25), there were also five culturally Deaf (white) women participants. Like Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist thought and Alice Walker's womanl.am, Africanist Sista-hood In Britain also seeks alliances with other •Qdal groups in an attempt to address social Inequality in all its forms,'it- this case, the alliance is sought with culturally Deaf women and with,thc incorporation ofDeaf cultural discourse as a contribution to the study.'"

The central tenets of Afrkanlst Sista-hood in Britain are set out below;

Self-naming

As Black women when we connect to the many historical journeys f f our African (an)Sistas - enslavement, colonial rule and the differeat ways many of our African countries have been raped and pill.agcil, and re-named by our oppressors - the Issue of self-naming becomes evei more important. The legacy of the Anglicised names many of<us tidll carry should not be overlooked.

Asante" in his discussion of Afrocentric principles points outiljW attempts of Black people, whether from the Caribbean· or elsewhere.

seeking to reconnect to our histories and original connections to Afdca by adopting Afrkan names as part of that connection. It is an empowering process we can undertake on an individual level, but as a collective. of Black women, claiming a name created by white women for white women (feminism) does seem to help maintain the structures of the oppressors. A valid point made by Jain and Turner is: 'when we look at the term feminist through the lens of the politics of naming we see that it is not an impartial label and that there are multiple reasons why women are reluctant to identify with it'.[11] The dissent that has been voiced for many decades both in Western and African women's discourses still remains active and unsatisfied.

'.Africanist Sista-hood in Britain' takes from womanism and Africana womanlsm the importance of self-naming and as such makes no allcmpt to seek a variant within a feminist label. It acknowledges and responds to the voices of a significant number of women who have rejected both the terminology and framework of feminism as steeped in n hislory of racism, exploitation and white supremacy. In addition to women of colour, Jain and Turner also highUght similar rejections of feminism from Lesbian and disabled women. They state: 'it ls still not something we feel comfortable identifying with and we are not alonc'.[11]

Self-naming outside of existing models leads to greater freedom and creativity in self-definition. SofoJaH poinls out the limilatlons of the English language in which women are seen as an appendage to men: woman or female or the universalising use of man or human to refer to oath sexes. She further contrasts this with African languages that use lllltutral terminology: Nwa-oke (male) and Nwa-nyi (female) as examples ,from the Igbo language of Nigeria with both deriving from the neutral word Nwa (child). A framework that embraces Sista-hood removes ,the appendages impUdlt in feminism and womanism and the words from which they derive, because In doing so there is no reliance on the ,lllaScullne and thus womanhood and indeed Black womanhood emerges asttbe central focus.

•centrality of Black womanhood

any work on Black womanhood, Africanist Sista-hood in Britain aecb to centralise the experiences and perspectives of Black women. It is tlt:tsiP<>sitiontng of Black womanhood though that causes some tension fn,thc field. Hudson-Weems" in i\frkana Womanism' provides a clear

message about the pervasive state of race as the major factor in the subjugation of Black women. She promotes the importance of prioritising race for Black women as a prerequisite for dealing with questions of gender. Black feminists in their criticism of Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism point to the work of the Combahee River collective in America, who stated: 'We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy Is *as pervasive* in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race'[10] (emphasis added). In this statement it ls clear that for the Black feminism they speak of, neither race nor class can be seen as more pervasive than patriarchy. Gender is always to be' seen as at least equally significant to all other aspects of identity. However, as Black women our lived reality often challenges this position.

When we consider these academic debates in the context of the everyday lived experiences of Black women in the United Kingdom 'it: brings these complexities to life. For the Black female research participants in my study It was clear that, for some, race was interpreted1 as the primary source of oppression. The public sector, which houses many female-dominated professions, can also often test those gender boruls where Black women report the main perpetrators of racism as white women.

In considering these issues the framework of Africanlst Slsta4iooo in Britlan adopts a similar approach to Africana Womanism, .inf1Re recognition that race can and does often become *more pervasille* than gender even at the intersections. While recognising that there is no single universal position of womanhood, or indeed Black womanhood. our frameworks need also be reflective of the fluidity of our ever:yiky interactions that in many cases highlight race and/or other aspects lJ. our identity as more influential than gender, This is not to negate the importance of intersectionality, which is slgnifkant to the A&k:anta' Sista-hood framework.

Intersectionality

For Crenshaw'[7] there ls a need to acknowledge the validity of, creal[ing] a space for recognition of Black women that reflects the di'l'trilty of their experiences in order to protect them from legal, theoretic:al and political erasure. She introduces the notion of lnte as a useful way of understanding the multi-dimensional di human identity by applying this specifically to Black women. lntened ionality

entails thinking about social reality as multi-dimensional, Uved identities as intertwined, as systems of oppression as meshed nod mutually constitutivc:[11]

Intersectionality ls central to Afrlcanist Sista-hood in recognising the different ways multiple oppressions con impact simultaneously on Black women from all backgrounds. However, within the fin ngs of my research there ls a recognition that our intcrsectional identities are not static and impact on us differentially in different environments. Any discussions about the pervasiveness of race, class and gende r should also include the fluidity that accompanies ii. The pervasiveness of the different aspects of our identities can be place and time specific. *My* own position as a researcher working with two different participant groups provides a good example of this. As a Black female hearing researcher, my identity has many facets, When researching with Black female participants my hearing status pervaded little if nny of the space we occupied, but *my* status as a hearing person became materially important in the research with culturally Deaf women. Issues of power surfaced in terms of existing histories of oppression in Deaf/hearing research relationships but these were further complicated by e.risling histories ofracc and power as all the Deaf participants were also white women,

An Africanist approach

The term fricanist' similar to Afrocentric principles adopts a Pan African perspective in seeking to make diasporlc ties. In this way, it makes connections to our (an)Sista-raJ or direct heritage In Africa. Like Toni Morrison," however, there is also recognition of both a geographical and Ideological notion of Africa. In her writing in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* one of the key themes ls the way '6 which Africa's or Africanist historical influences continue to shape the lcitrrent position of African-American people in America.

For many in Britain, 'Black' hns become a political identity as an all-inclusive term for all who experience racism.'[o] In taking an Afrlcanist approach within the framework, there is recognition of the *way* that there has been an overcrowding of the Black space where all who are iiot white British have legitimised claim within the political tenn Black. l:fowever, in practice, the separation does not always end with the white lion, as illustrated *by* Henry's" writing about participating tin a iBlack History Month event In London, where Irish dancing was

being presented as one of the celebrations of Black history. There ls of course a need to recognise Irish oppression at the hands of the English, however, locating this within notions of political Blackness can and does result in decentring, dilution and lack of recognition of Black people's specific experiences of structural racism. It also draws false equivalences between different people's experiences of nuanced forms of systematic oppression.

One impact of how the notion of political Blackness ls mobllllsed is the potential invlslbilising of Black people's lives and struggles, especially where they are a minority within a larger minority ethnic population. This was a finding in many of the northern towns and cities where I did my research. This invlslbillsing is a position demographically evident in localities of many Black people, but curiously absent from policy debates which more often than not focus on a wider discussion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) or 'Black' (in the political sense), which have become more homogenising than they should be. In taklng an Afrlcanitt approach there ls more opportunity to make links with the importance of our histories, and connections to our (an)Slstas be that via our linRs with Africa, the Caribbean or any other dlasporic lines.

Pooling resources with Black men

The complicated histories between Black men and women m relationship with our Black brothas[22] historically and neceas,illy a boundaried one, but one that is more complex than first appears tniany feminist analysis.

In Britain capitalism has thrived on the exploitation of Blaclc not just in terms of the trade in enslaved Africans but also in mfto postwar migrations and employment patterns in th$_{e.}$ United .l(h)gdom. This creates white privilege which white men and women work in,unlty to preserve.

Carby points out that 'Racism ensures that Black men do nobliave the same relations to patriarchal/capitalist hierarchies as white men/•> UK data shows poorer outcomes for Black people in education. ing, employment, wealth and hereditary entitlements. These are positions we share with Black men, who in some cases fare :.worse tthan their Sistas in these areas. As Black women we are for the mosb p-rtllloïJ. into Black families where we will have shared our formative ,years with

our Black brothers, fathers, uncles, grandfathers - many 0£,wliom will. ha\'e provided a positive contribution to our very being. Thij is not, the experience of all Black women, due to reasons such as the UK care system, absent parents, interracial parenting, fostering, adoption and differing individual circumstances. However, Black women and men often need to pool resources in order to fight the race struggle,and to nurture our children (male and female) to equip them for the same flght.

Womanlsm has been recognised as making stronger links with Black men than with white women when compared to Black femln1sm.2-1 At the same time, it has been criticised for overlooking the problems of sexist oppression from Black men towards Black women!' In Afrlcana womanlsm this issue is linked to African traditions of male and female working partnerships, For others, however, Africana womanism 'cffec-Uvely thwarts critique of sexism in Black communitics'.[16]

Black feminism by definition with its identification within the femlnist frame has been criticised for stronger associations with white women and Issues of gender oppression being prioritised over that of racial oppression.[11-•1]

An Afrlcanist Sista-hood perspective takes elements from all these discourses to reflect on and recognise the shifting position we share with our men. It recognises the way 'racism divides certain categories of women and unites them with men'.•[9] The aim is not to ignore the significance of the sexist oppression that is present within Black communities in Britain. It ls more about recognising the value in rela. tionshlps between Black men and women, while also trying to eradicate oppression. Africanist Sista-hood adopts from Africana womanlsm the partncrship approach in which there ls recognition of the different, but equal, roles for men and women set out in *many* traditional African comrnunitles.>[o] At the same time, *it* adopts both womanists' and Black 'fentlrusts' thinking of seeking to fight racial oppression while working to fight gender oppression.

The British context

alack British feminist discourse incorporates a politically Black Identity that is specific to the UK context. Discourses and terminology around J)c>Utlcal Blackness have been criticised because of the unrealistic expec-

tations encompassed in terms of the differences which are overlooked, simplified and stereotyped,[J1] as well as the differences in gendered racisms which can have differing impacts on Black and Asian women,[J1] A Block British feminist discourse that operates within this political Blackness should also be open to criticism. 'Scholars and activists who continue to utilise "Black" to describe groups other than Africans and Cacibbeans risk the accusation of being outdated and out of touch with the realities of multiracial Europe:[J1] Taking an Africanist approach such as that built into Africanist Sista-hood removes this contestation and provides further validation of diasporic connections.

In adopting the terminology of Black *British* feminism, further limitations arise not just for those who object to a feminist frame. Its link to Britishness may also work to exclude those who are Black in Britain but do not identify as British, and for others, such as refugees and asylum seekers, who, despite living in Britain, may not be considered British. Reference to Afrlcanist Sista-hood 'in Britain' addresses this issue and. widens the scope of Afrlcanlst inclusivity within that shared location. including through its lack of emphasis on Britishness.

The importance of experience

Calling on the work of Collins,[14] Reynolds[H] discusses the concept of 'knowing without knowing: Within the framework of canist Sista-hood in Britain', the concept of 'knowing without knowing} :b linked back to earlier positions described in Black feminist theorls:lb& where white professionals strip experiences presented by Black woman, and re-present partial or distorted accounts more palatable to wfilte frames of analysis. hooks demonstrates this point well: 'Frequently college educated Black women ... were dismissed as mere imitators: ẽtm presence in movement activities did not count as wltite women were convinced that areal" blackness meant speaking the patois of poor,Blac::i people, being uneducated, streetwise, and a variety of others ""

Lived experience is a central tenet where validation and autKentk- ity from within the Sista-hood is gained. Authenticity, autonomy l'rid agency are therefore key elements. The centrality of lived exee does not mean only Black women can contribute to the discourse but within any contribution the limitations of knowledge and lence should also be acknowledged.

i\FRICANIST SISTA-HOOD IN BRITAIN': FINDING OUR OWN WAY BACK

In Africanist Sista-hood there is (re)Sista-nce to attempts to define individuals and groups in relation to socially constructed norms. The framework in its epistemology takes account of the situated ontology of individual Black women, in which there is an autmnatic recognition of diversity that **exists** simultaneously with collectivity, commonality and difference. It is also important to recognise that all the women in n Sista-hood collectlve will have a shared experience of being a Black woman in Britain, no matter how diverse those experiences are.

Like many emancipatory frameworks, for Afrkanist Sista-hood, the interpretivist paradigm Is particularly appropriate as it recognises that different and often contested constructions exist, but further seeks to highllght the way particular majority group constructions are dominant and influential, often at the expense of alternative subaltern constructions from the minority. Issues of power, control of power and agency are central to this understanding. Those furthest from the control of power and resources that shape society are least likely to have their constructions validated or acknowledged. Africanist Sista-hood challenges other dominant power relations which support hegemonic assumptions of what it is to be Black and female in contemporary British society, by foregrounding Black female experiences as a source of validation.

Like Africana womanism, though Afrlcanist Sista-hood in Britain moves away from existing feminist frameworks and works from a self-determined and self-structured position, it is not defined b)' oppositional status. Instead, it can be understood as recognising the potential that can be born from Black women's collectives. The idea of collectiveness associated with Africanist Sista-hood is not intended to imply essentialist homogeneity. Rather, it Is a perspectfre that ls organic and developing out of diverse Black female contributions to knowledge, and 'intellectualising:[J7] which comes from many different arenas, most Jr which are situated outside of academia. It therefore brings together epistemology and ontology as validated by Black females within the collectives.

The terminology of Africanist Sista-hood in Britain can be broken down into its component parts as outlined in the following.

An '.Africanist' perspective keeps the focus on diaspora and those 'Within it. The Africanist perspective within the framework allows a dear

diasporic link to Africa whether via the Caribbean or elsewhere. Recognition of Africanist identities also often work to replace geographical separations with ideational connections or reclamations;[31] in this sense, an Africanist Identity ls not just restricted to African people along a traditional geographical line, it is more inclusive and includes everyone within the wider diaspora.

The term 'Sista', and therefore 'Sista-hood: has a vernacular home within many Black female narratives in the United Kingdom, as well as many of the paths along the routes of the African diaspora. There are traces of this in many forms of popular culture, for example, fashion, music, art and entertainment. Unlike the term feminism, It does not carry the negative history of Eurocentrism and white middle class privilege. Unlike the debates about womanism, it ls not one that could be confined to privileged Black women as asserted by Collins.[39] It is a term that has originated from within Bleck communities and is recognised or used by Black women and men across the class structure, so should not imply any implicit disunity between Black men and women.

To be a Sista is different from being a 'sister'. It is to embrace more than the blood ties in a familial relationship. Familial terms like sister, brother, aunty and uncle are used simultaneously in the same way and: differently to indigenous populations. As in keeping with the womanlst metaphor, the familial relationship extends to the community too; 'family ls community and community is family'.[40] Unlike womanist origins, Sista-hood is not age specific, a Sista can be across the age spectnmJ, and also recognises the relational aspect of the term. With this in ntiha! though, the importance of generational variations ls also considemi; Springer's paper on third wave Black feminism involves recognitlobr of older Black feminists' 'mix of disappointment and understan g at young Black women's seeming lack of interest in feminism'.[41] Slic concludes her paper by calling on Bleck feminist$ to find creative ways to engage young Black women, including ideas about fusing Intellectualising with music as an untapped source of education. Afrlcanist Sista-hqsjdt in Britain, with its recognition of many different forms of in - lslng, seeks to encourage diversity in the many ways contributions can be made to this organic framework both in and outside acadcmlaJ '6li that music, poetry, fashion, technology, literature, art, media and.so¡cm, When also considering collaborations and fusions acros,different&ads. our creative potential extends even further.

The hyphenated '-hood' component of the term is aboutthe,co1Jectiv. ity and connectivity which is a driving force behind the concept:. Written into the terminology then is a visual representation of the points at which we both connect and diverge. A *Sista-hood* rather than *Sistahood* has built in recognition of the points of our departure as well as the•bond to our historical connections; it has recognition of the hyphenated sp;iccr4¹ and those who Inhabit it.

The 'in Britain' (as discussed) focuses on the locational context of Britain, rather than restricting it to women with British citizenship. It offers space for recognition of diversity in epistemological and ontological geographies, In sustaining an 'in Britain' focus rather than British, it aims to capture more of the diasporic diversity this offers to Black women within the same location.

CONCLUSION

In moving away from feminism, it is not in an attempt to deny the numerous achievements of Black feminists and womanists, rather it *is* an attempt to continue and build on that work but In a way that recognises and encourages the beauty and freedoms offered within our own originality. The importance of connecting with history is a key issue running through all the tenets of the framework. In connecting with our foremothers along the feminist terrain we uncover a shared historr of marginality, invisibility, (re)Sista-nce and creativity which highlight the inadequacies of the original feminist structures.

Ann duCille in her work around the depletion of beauty and the intro• ductlon of a Black Barbie doll made by pouring brown plastic Into tJ1e exJsting mould makes the point about how white beauty ls held as the ideal against which Black women are often measured. 'Today, Barbie dolls come in a virtual ralnbow coalition of colors (sic), races, ethnicities, and nationalities - most of which look remarkably like the prototypical white Barbie, modified only by a dash of color (sic) and a change of costume:•, They are as she describes them 'dye-dipped versions of the archetypal white American beauty'.4-1

Black feminist perspectives have been developed that challenge many of the assumptions and omissions made by mainstream feminist theorists. 'The struggle of Black women to claim a space within the odernist feminist discourse, and at the same time to engender critical lal reflexivity among white feminists, consumed the Black feminist

project for more than a decade:•[1] In remaining within the existing framework, this leaves us as Black women vying for a place at the table we have previously been excluded from. It cannot be denied that the space eventually afforded us was as a result ofBlack feminists' combined efforts but my point is that rather than channelling those resources in that direction a more fruitful endeavour would be for Black women to create their own table within their own space and according to their own needs. A table at which we determine whose or what interests are served.

Afrlcanist Sista-hood does take from Black feminist writers many of the criticisms of mainstream feminism and its marginalisation of Black women, but it Is the feminist framework itself that provides a valid point of departure. Going back to the Barbie doll example given earlier, a similar analogy can be made with the dash of colour of Black feminism and the original feminist frameworks. Has the hegemonic structure really changed?

Hudson-Weems in relation to our creative potential states: 'I cannot stress enough the critical need today for Afrlcana scholars throughout the world to create our own paradigms and theoretical frameworks for assessing our works:•[6] As a Black woman living out my experience in Britain, I can only write of an Africanlst Sista-hood in Britain. To our other Slstas throughout the world there are many spaces for many more contributions.

We are beautiful, we are talented, let's come together and create!

NOTES

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18. May, 'Speaking Into the void?; p. 96.
19. Toni Morrison, 1993. *Playing 111 tl,e D11rk: Whfte,iess a 11 d the Literary Imagl-,,atlon*. Pan Macmillan, London.
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PART Y

Digital and Creative Labour